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UNCLAS KINSHASA 000239

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: DRC MEDIA TROUBLES IN JANUARY

REF: 05 KINSHASA 2024

Sensitive But Unclassified. Not for Internet distribution.

1. (U) Summary: Some Congolese media were exposed to harassment during the second half of January. Adding together: 1) defamation as a criminal offense, 2) some irresponsible journalism, 3) lawlessness in some areas, and 4) coming elections, the free press will certainly face some added challenges in the coming months in the DRC. End summary.

Journalists Under the Gun in Eastern Congo

2. (U) Human rights groups reported that Radio Television La Colombe (RTC), the only radio station in Rutshuru (North Kivu), was forced to suspend broadcasting on January 24, following the seizure of equipment by unidentified soldiers. Reporters of RTC were also reportedly pursued and their possessions seized. Rutshuru was the scene of armed confrontations with insurgent soldiers in late January. The radio station, owned by North Kivu governor Eugene Serufuli, has reportedly not yet resumed broadcast.

3. (U) On January 11 the Kisangani Court of Appeal Prosecutor's Office temporarily closed Radio Mwangaza, a community radio station based in Kisangani, northeastern DRC, allegedly for failing to pay a monthly copyright fee for the music it broadcasts. The human rights group "Journaliste En Danger" (JED), however, noted that the closure occurred after the station broadcast a message exhorting the government to respect its commitments in order to avoid a students and nurses' strike in Kisangani. While recognizing the fact that media outlets have a duty to pay taxes, JED stressed that economic pressure is an effective way to stifle the media. Radio Mwangaza resumed broadcasting on January 14, perhaps as a result of the formal JED notice the day before.

Editor of Kinshasa Paper Arrested for Libel

4. (U) On January 27, elements of the DRC national police arrested Mr. Jean-Louis Ngalamulume, the editor-in-chief of "L'Eclair", a Kinshasa-based newspaper. Mr. Ngalamulume was apprehended days after publishing an article calling a seemingly influential title deed registrar "incompetent" and "tribalist." On January 28, the Prosecutor General's Office at the Court of Appeal questioned Mr. Ngalamulume on the "provocative" article. The editor was transferred to Kinshasa's penitentiary on January 31, where he is still detained.

Comment

5. (U) The media scene in the DRC remains dynamic, even crowded. While Kisangani-based Radio Mwangaza was shut down for a few days, six new radio stations opened in January, bringing Kisangani's total to eleven. We note, too, that Ntumba Lumembu, arrested in September for trying to announce his own coup d'etat on state radio (reftel), was released on January 11 for being mentally incompetent.

6. (SBU) Nonetheless, particularly as long as defamation remains a criminal offense in the DRC, journalists remain subject to arbitrary sanctions by legal authorities. They can also be victims of outright violence in areas of eastern DRC subject to bouts of lawlessness. The coming electoral campaigns will likely expose journalists to even more risk of censure, and their lack of experience and professionalism adds to their vulnerability.

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